

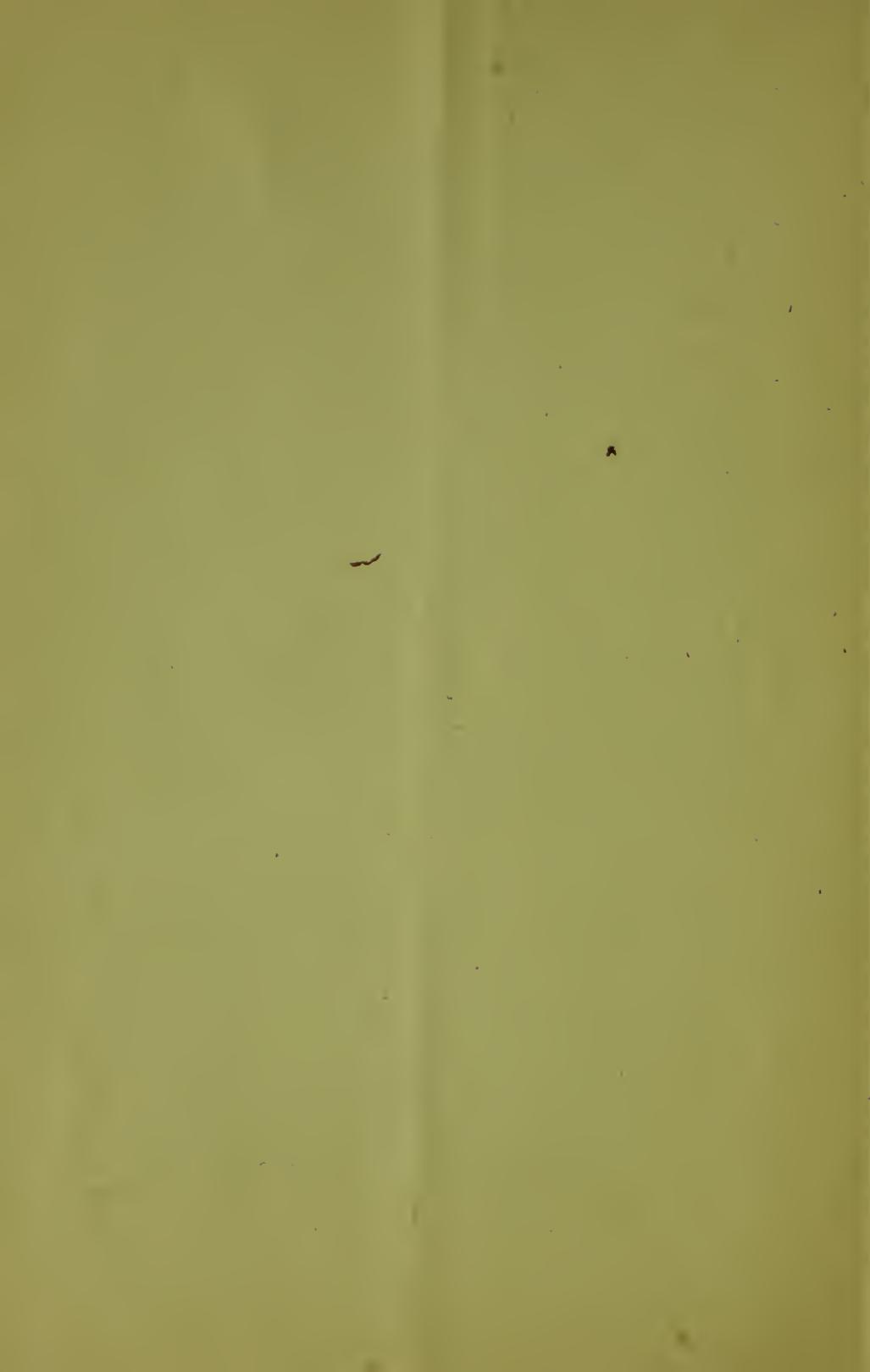
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THE NATION AND THE SOLDIER.

BY

GEORGE R. PECK.





THE NATION AND THE SOLDIER.

AN ORATION

Delivered before the Indiana Commandery of the Military
Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States,
at Indianapolis, July 4, 1890.

By
GEORGE R. PECK.

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THE NATION AND THE SOLDIER.

COMPANIONS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: From the distant West, the historic, fruitful and now peaceful fields of our first civic strife, I bring you a salutation and a greeting. The day and the occasion are happily mated. From immemorial times, men who have borne arms have enjoyed a certain distinction; the tribute that human nature yields to those who have played the big stakes of life and death. Responsive to, or perhaps created by, this sentiment, is the tendency of those who have been in the stress and rigor of the game, to look back with a feeling which is partly love, and partly pride, on the old days — and the old cause.

It matters little that many seasons have passed since arms were stacked; nor that we who were young and gay, have felt the frost in our joints and on youthful forms the rust of the implacable years. The soldier must not question fate. This much is ours: to know, that if eyes beam somewhat less brightly and heads reveal the gray autumnal touch, the things that once were dear are

precious yet, and the faith of other days has not departed.

This is a holy day; but surely we may be pardoned if while we remember that it means a nation's birth, some of us shall recall that it means also Vicksburg's famous victory, and the river that flowed unvexed to the sea. Nor can a Union soldier be blamed if he remembers that once he kept the day on the field of Gettysburg, knowing at last that the Fourth of July was not a dream, but a living and majestic reality. Such memories as these, lingering fondly in the soldier's heart, are the true sanctions of this order to which we belong, and of every organization in which the veterans of the war have gathered themselves. In the due adjustment of rights and interests; the establishment of those great equities that mark the true relation of a citizen to his Government, the soldier of the Union has no right to claim that the Nation belongs to him. But he has a right to think that in a peculiar sense he belongs to the Nation. Whatever weakness may dwell in his heart, whatever sorrows may darken his life, whatever temptations have been too strong for his will to resist, nevertheless nothing can rob him of the dignity that belongs to every man who can say, "I helped to save the United States of America, one and indivisible."

The Loyal Legion signifies, to us at least, that

loyalty is a virtue which should never go out of fashion. Love of country is not, and should not be, a sentiment that responds only to the bugle and the drum. It is indeed true that the finest impulses may lie dormant, waiting the call that shall transmute them into vital convictions. But yet it is also true that a nation is best endowed when it has the common every-day affection of its people, in peace as well as in war.

The people of the United States call themselves Americans, claiming the name of the continent to mark their aspirations and their destiny. But what is that ideal feeling we sometimes call "the American spirit"? Surely it is not a selfish lust of possession; the vulgar satisfaction of knowing that we inhabit an imperial domain, and that no one must trespass on what we call our own. Some better reason must be in our hearts, some truer feeling must inspire our lives, before we can rightly know what patriotism is. Even the brute loves its own jungle. The tiger will fight to the death for the greensward on which it has played, or the spring at which it has quenched its thirst. Only men fight for a sentiment; only men give up their lives for the things they have not seen. Fields of cotton and fields of corn will grow under any sun that yields its compelling rays. The harvest cares not what sickle shall reap it. Nature is calmly indifferent; dealing out the rude justice of the seasons, and

heeding not the losses nor the gains. But men think; they alone have "that large discourse looking before and after" which is the real basis of moral responsibility. The true American loves not simply the United States, but that for which the United States stands. The American flag is something more than a harmonious blending of colors. Who has not felt the awe and mystery that dwell in holy emblems? What faith has not been quickened by signs and symbols that represent those invisible and eternal things of which human lips can never rightly speak? The United States is greater in what it means than in what it is. When the war was upon us, if territory had been all that was involved we could have settled the dispute, and ought to have settled it, by an agreed division. The household gods could have been parted; the fields and herds apportioned. There was room for Abraham and for Lot; but there was not room for two ideas that never could be one. The Saracen and the Frank never blended, because they worshiped at different shrines; and North and South could only make a mockery of Union while one was for freedom and the other against it. History, when truly written, deals less with men than with ideas; less with the boundaries of empires than with customs, traditions, and faiths. We said we were fighting for the Union, and so we truly were; but up in the stars, if we had looked, we should

have seen that Union meant something of infinitely more worth than farms and factories, or ships and custom-houses. The act which makes this day memorable derives its lustre, not from the fact that it established a Nation, but because it touched the true note to which a Nation's life should be set. The Declaration of Independence was not the casting off of one government and the setting up of another. It was a reconstruction of the very idea of government; the assertion of doctrines which men had vaguely carried in their hearts, but had thought them too good to be true. I imagine they were surprised at their own audacity when they set their names to that heroic recital of wrongs and the illustrious declaration of rights which went with it.

It is a peculiarity of the Anglo-Saxon race that it does not much incline to abstract speculation on matters of government, religion, or morals; but no people are so skillful in drawing up those great State papers which become landmarks of history. Such was Magna Charta; such were the acts and resolutions of that Puritan Parliament that brought an English King to the block; such was the great declaration of rights which John Somers in the name of all the estates of the realm hurled at the House of Stuart; such were the rude but comprehensive constitutions framed by the first comers to New England; and such was the Declaration of Independence which

Thomas Jefferson wrote, and a people with the English love of liberty in their veins sanctioned and inspired. There is in the history, the literature, and in the very language of our race, a sort of divine compulsion to self-government.

“We must be free or die who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake; the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held.”

There is an insoluble mystery in the processes of historical development. We only know what appears on the surface. We see the wave, but not the force that whitens its crest, and dashes it against the shore. And yet, there is a meaning in it, as there is a meaning in the strange, tireless and ceaseless motion of humanity. In some way we may be sure that nothing happens that ought to have been omitted from the drama of history. There is a right and a wrong; but God gathers them together and makes them serve a purpose too large for us to understand. No one knows, or cares to know, the names of those who died at Marathon; but Marathon itself, the glories that cluster round the story of that heroic day, are in our lives, common and prosaic as they seem. It is not only an alluring theory, but a truth, which science has announced, that every human being, by the law of heredity, is an epitome of all the generations whose blood is in his veins. In the truest sense, all the sacrifices of the past, the agonies, the sorrows and the tears,

were for us; and for us too, were the glories and the joys that tell how life may be won, even when it is lost.

More than a century has passed since the Declaration of Independence was published. How stately and formal its sentences seem to us who have been through the furnace to keep them from being dishonored! Is it indeed true that all men are created equal? Are life and liberty really so sacred as our fathers thought? Has time justified their lofty words, the brave God-speed with which they launched the bark that carried such precious freight? History will answer these questions; and your names will be upon the page. They proclaimed self-evident truths; but alas! no truth ever yet marched far towards its goal without a struggle, and so the Fourth of July had to face the inevitable, not once, but twice; and you are the witnesses of its courage, its faith, and its triumph.

In the rush and hurry of these busy days, and with the memories, sad and tragic, of our own contest fresh upon us, we do not perhaps always do justice to the men who were the first apostles of liberty. Let us not vaunt ourselves, nor set our music to the highest key. We must not think because Appomattox was glorious, that Yorktown was of little moment. A life is a life; and Liberty counts all her jewels of equal value. We trod a rugged path, but so did they who counted

not the years that were needed to bring them their deliverance.

The Declaration of Independence is incomparably the greatest, wisest and clearest statement of human rights ever put upon paper. And it is a curious fact that neither the men who framed it nor their contemporaries were always successful when they put their hands to the pen. The Articles of Confederation were, from the first, a hopeless failure. Ten amendments to the Constitution were made almost immediately after its adoption, two shortly afterwards, and finally, as you know too well, three more were written in blood. Even now, there are many respects in which it could doubtless be improved. But the Declaration of Independence remains forever "one entire and perfect chrysolite;" and is confessedly the true gospel of our freedom, the true standard of American rights. In that great statement of the equality of men, is found the best medicine for national disease, the best balm for the hurts and bruises of the body politic. It means equality of opportunity; a just share in the gifts of nature; a fair chance in the race of life, under laws that all have helped to make. The right to these things is inalienable. It can neither be taken away, nor voluntarily given up; for the Declaration of Independence means that you cannot rightfully make your brother a slave even by his own consent. In short, this great

charter, in the lines and between the lines, declares that the golden rule of legislation and government, like the golden rule of human conduct, is the unselfish recognition of the rights of others. It is a high ideal; too high, perhaps, for the eighteenth or the nineteenth century, but not too high for the age that is coming, when the ashes of the dead shall blossom in hopes made real, and the blood of martyrs shall crimson the flower that truth sets in the wreath of the immortals.

We are sixty millions of people. What an uncounted multitude of interests are at stake, and how hard it is to keep the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the ignorant and the wise, each in his own proper orbit; each in that harmonious relation to the other which is the aim of a government like ours. The sublimity of such a conception, the ideal perfectness to which it aspires, adds to the difficulty of attaining it. For neither the Declaration of Independence, nor golden rules, nor the teachings of the wise, nor the example of the good, have cleared men's hearts of the taint of selfishness. We still think of ourselves first, of our section, our class, and the interest which lies nearest our own. The men who live by the mountains, and the men who live by the sea, imagine sometimes that God placed them there for the benefit only of those who dwell by their side. But the true idea of

this Nation is unity; not of States alone, but of interests, so that each shall be for all, and all for each. The ships that sail to far-off shores, the fields that give their increase, the mines filled with the wealth which Nature tried to hide,—what are these but the gifts which under God's law no man can hold unto himself alone? We are trustees for each other; and in the light of those great words which make the Declaration immortal, how shall an American citizen forget his fellows who are heirs to every right he calls his own? “And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.”

Every hour hath its peril; and the peril of this hour is forgetfulness. It is for you more than for any one else—soldiers who made the color of the sky more beautiful by wearing it on your breasts—it is for you who did not forget *then*, to see that this Nation does not forget now.

Rufus Choate, with rare but unhappy felicity of speech, once spoke of “the glittering and sounding generalities which make up the Declaration of Independence.” But the world discovered that they were something more, when the pen of Abraham Lincoln graved them on the dusky palms of four millions of slaves. The lesson of that act, and of every act which has a heart in it, is that always an opportunity is waiting to make life sweeter by making it freer.

The problem is, how to adjust the clashing interests of men, so that each shall have an equal chance; so that selfishness shall see that it stands in its own light; so that those who are in the front shall help those who linger, and they who are slow of foot shall quicken their pace to the music that is sounding for all. This Nation stands dedicated to liberty, to justice, and to that impersonal representative of both—Law. Put the Declaration of Independence into every statute, and our National polity will glow with something of that brightness that shines in the faces of men when the Sermon on the Mount is revealed to their listening hearts.

Statesmanship is said to be a practical art, and so indeed it is; but I wish that cabinets and courts and senates would always remember, that in this Nation nothing can be of such practical importance as the inviolate observance of the principles which make this day all that it is. Statesmen should learn, and the people themselves should not forget, that truth never yet lost any of its beauty when crystallized into law. All that we know of what is called progress in this world consists of getting ideals incorporated into the lives of men and of nations; of clothing sentiment in the flesh and blood of the actual; of making things spiritual manifest in things real.

Back of the flower is the sense of beauty that makes its colors pleasant to the eye; back of

every noble utterance is the moral sentiment that attests its truth. If you would know the value of the Declaration of Independence, think what our lives would be if we had never felt its inspiring touch, nor known what meanings are revealed in its pregnant sentences. The men who signed it, and the men who fought for it, had us in their minds as well as themselves, and in the truest sense they knew that the stamping of paper and the taxing of tea were of little consequence compared with the right which you and I enjoy of being masters of ourselves, and of our own inheritance. Do you think they could have carried on a seven-years war if they had not felt that they were fighting the battles of the future? Men will dare more for rights than for money, or property, or land; for it is and always must be true, that the things which are most precious are those which are not seen, nor bought, nor sold.

Fellow-soldiers, it is not wrong for you to be proud that some day history will link your names with the names of those who saluted the dawn of American liberty. The time will come when men will little heed the years that separate the age of Washington from the age of Lincoln. They will rightly think that time is not important when a great cause is in the balance, and that centuries are but breathing-spells when liberty leads the column. What does it signify whether a soldier fought at

Salamis, or at Naseby?—at Saratoga, or at Shiloh? All are in the ranks of the immortal. Time names her classics, and sets the seal of glory on every field where men have died for men. The soldier is but a pawn upon the board. And yet how great are the issues of war. If the battle of Tours had gone the other way, the sign of the camel-driver would have blazed all over western Europe. A hundred fields where Union soldiers fought would have been lost but for their enduring faith; and if lost, our cause, which was surely the holiest ever yet submitted to arms, might have gone into the sad and dreary list that history writes down as failures. Failure: it is hard to think now that by any possibility it could have come to us. And yet, how many weary days there were when the issue trembled and hopes were dim, and even faith was chastened with tears. We shall not forget in this life, the eager and exultant prophecies of defeat wafted across the sea, from those who thought that crowns and coronets could go on prospering, but that a government with liberty in it must perish. Military critics, wise in their generation, said victory was impossible; and skillful pens were busy writing down the fate of the great republic. But they forgot God. And they forgot the men, who, standing in the ranks, had taught their very bayonets to believe that this Nation could not die.

It is not for us to lightly speak of those who followed another flag than ours. Some there were, nearly all, perhaps, who thought they did God's service. And yet, they were wrong; blind, deaf, deceived, and betrayed by those who knew the light, but loved the darkness. We call them rebels; but let us not forget that they were *our* rebels. They were our countrymen; bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, and every soldier of the Union down in his heart is murmuring the prayer, "What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder." And we, who wore the blue, must forever, and for always, stand fast by the Declaration of Independence, and by the glory that was in it when Cornwallis dipped the standard of England to the banner of Washington, and when Lee lowered the wretched stars and bars to that flag which was Grant's and yours and mine. It is the flag of the present and the future; the one in many, the many in one; the sign of victory to those who fought for it, and of grace, mercy and peace for those who blindly fought against it.

A quarter of a century has flown since we were mustered out. Hate, anger, and passion have gone from our hearts. The fires have sunk into ashes; the lights are out; the martial hymns have faded into an echo. I am sure I speak the sentiment of every Union soldier when I repeat the language of our old commander, "Let us have peace," and of him who carried the burden of

the years: "We are not enemies, but friends; we must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave to every living heart and hearth-stone will yet swell the chorus of the Union when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature." The prophecy of Lincoln is coming true. The better angels are here; and in every place where soldiers give the hand and the heart with it, to those who turn their eyes to the front, and bow their heads to the august future, and its noble promises. Only this we ask—and we ask it with an insistence that will not grow less with years: Let us be friends indeed; let us feel that the past is irrevocable, but not therefore wasted. Let us join hands and go forward to the duty that lies nearest.

Something I might say, if it were right to say anything, of a somewhat too effusive joy that marked a recent tribute to a great soldier, who gave his name and his sword to a cause we believe to be unspeakably wrong. It is not for us to decide how far military skill or personal character can lessen the guilt of treason. But of this, oh! loyal hearts, be sure: neither bronze nor marble can endure long enough to change wrong into right, nor to cure the broken oath of Robert E. Lee. Some day, perhaps, another colossal form

will stand by the side of his, grand, massive and heroic, the statue of one who simply thought that a soldier's plighted word meant what it said; a man who spoke little of his honor, but kept it stainless as the snow; a soldier of the antique type; the greatest son Virginia gave to the war—George H. Thomas, the Rock of Chickamauga.

North and South: they are not pleasant words. As Americans, as soldiers who fought for the cause that carried liberty and civilization in its bosom, let us try to make all our countrymen see that the victory was *for all*: that they who lost, won, far beyond their largest dream of empire. For God so ordered it that their blood and heroism should be blended with that of their brothers who wore the blue, and together they have builded the noblest structure this earth has seen. Its lofty dome shelters those who loved it not—equally with those who wrought with willing hearts to lay its foundations and to rear its enduring walls. The world takes daily note of it, and sees that Milton's prophetic conception of an ideal nation has here been realized. "Not many sovereignties united in one commonwealth, but many commonwealths in one united and intrusted sovereignty."

They say that soldiers grow garrulous with age. But why should they not? The tents are down. The camp is broken up. What is left but memories and hopes? When Harry of Eng-

land led his soldiers to Agincourt it was easy to tell them of "modest stillness and humility." But who could hush their tongues to peace when, gathered in the village alehouse, or under the shade of spreading English elms, they told of that immortal day and how they won the fight under the smiling skies of France?

It is but natural, that as age steals on, we should talk more and more of Grant and Sherman, of Sheridan and Hancock, and the comrades who stood within elbow-touch when the fight was at its whitest heat. One name stands for many; the leader represents all who followed him in the deadly assault, or stood by his side when the guns were double-shotted to welcome the coming foe. The man who won his stars by honest service, the stars that gleamed with the light of duty well performed, stands for all who in the nameless throng of gallant men, made it possible for him to wear them. Only non-combatants imagine that some speechless gulf separated the Marshal who led an army, from the un-epauletted Marshal who carried his baton in his knapsack. We were all fighting for the same cause, and they who led only followed, and they who followed, led.

It is an honor I cannot fitly acknowledge to stand before this assemblage of ununiformed valor. Here are hearts that once throbbed with the joy of victory, and almost ceased to beat in the sor-

row that comes to those who see the flag go down. The soldiers of Indiana, brave as the bravest, kept step on every battle-field with the column that marched to the front. Here, too, are the soldiers of other States. They helped with might and main. But little does the Union soldier heed whether a comrade's home was East or West, or North or South. They fought for a cause which stood four-square, and on every side was written, Liberty. There is joy in their hearts when they think how they followed the flag, and joy when they meet in soldier fashion to pledge the days that are left, by the days that are no more.

Our lives are short. The world, ancient and wrinkled with the years, is strange and curious, for we hardly learn it before we pass away. It is sometimes hard to comprehend that anything is worth struggling for. But, thanks to those who have marked the way, life is not altogether fruitless even here. Death is a mystery but not a terror to those who have been wrought upon by a great cause. Out in the street are the sounding demonstrations, which tell us that in a way less quiet than ours youth and strength are giving their lusty brawn to the celebration of the day. What does it mean? Only this: that freedom is so divine a thing that men cannot give it honor enough until they drown all other sounds in the noisy chorus of American nationality. If you

listen you will be conscious of a deeper harmony, that tells how always under the tumults are the silent depths; that within the music there is another music, playing the self-same air in tones so soft that only the soul can hear. Let us be content; for to-day and every day our eyes behold the glad results of the great war. Sorrow turns to joy when we think what is—and what might have been. We have not seen, and shall not see, every wrong made right. God always keeps some cause for future generations to serve. But what you did, soldiers of the Union, will make it easier for those who in the days that are coming shall try to lift up Truth and put a crown upon her brow. The Fourth of July and the faith it stands for cannot perish in this age, nor while men shall hear how a loyal people went forth to battle in God's name and won the day. And the soldiers coming home, as they laid away their swords and muskets, felt in their blood the words which Lowell put into his great Ode:

“What were our lives without thee?
What all our lives to save thee?
We reck not what we gave thee;
We will not dare to doubt thee,
But ask whatever else, and we will dare.”

The night of life is not far off. We thought it would come more slowly, but even now its shadows are upon us. We have had our day. But while we live, the old fires will flash when-

ever danger appears, and the old habit come back when we hear the reveille. The soldier remains on guard. Always in his heart is the image of a Nation, great, noble, merciful, patient, free. He waits—and thinks.



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